

## **Judith Thunem**

Judith Thunem was born in Norway in 1918, and is the eighth of nine children. She left school at fourteen, and has spent most of her life at her parents' farmhouse home on an island off the Norwegian coast. Since the age of seventeen she has had long periods in hospital receiving treatment for rheumatoid arthritis.

Miss Thunem reads a great deal, and has a special interest in poetry and drama. She also studies languages-English, French and German.

## **The Invalid Mind**

**(Chapter 4 in Hunt, P. (ed.) 1966: Stigma: The Experience of Disability, London: Geoffrey Chapman).**

THE DISABLED are often spoken about as if they are a group of people who are very much alike, and who have more or less the same problems. But this is not really so. Within this group there are men, women and children of all races, of all ages. Moreover, the degree of disability may vary greatly from one individual to another.

When one considers this, one might well ask if the disabled have any common problems at all. But assuming they have, what are those problems? La Rochefoucauld clarifies this point admirably for us. He remarks that often people are more troubled by their attitudes to facts than by the facts themselves, and this observation exposes the heart of the matter. Disabled people, different from each other as they may be, have a great common problem, the problem of attitude. The attitude of society towards the disabled, the attitude of the disabled towards society, the attitude of the disabled person towards himself. It may be objected that not just one but three problems are mentioned. But these problems are interlaced, so to

speak; they are dependent upon and explain one another. Therefore, the problem of being disabled isn't a problem of attitudes, but rather a problem of attitude. In order to make this more clear, I want to look at what happens to a physically defective child born into our highly civilized and refined society.

We all know that in primitive communities a severely handicapped child is likely to be rejected and even destroyed. I would suggest that, after all, we do not behave so very differently. No doubt self-satisfied and self-righteous society will consider me wrong, but I think that a look at modern society will prove my point.

It is surely true that even today the handicapped child isn't received in quite the same way as other children. The reactions of parents and family may vary. They may show horror, sorrow, anxiety, bitterness; but very rarely is the little one a welcome gift. The neighbours and acquaintances generally look upon the stricken family with great pity. Some old-fashioned people may whisper about a punishment for some secret sin. This I have heard myself, although I trust and hope that such a reaction is not often found in our enlightened time. Is this reaction so very different from that of the savage? Society will quickly point out that, after all, we don't kill these children; we allow them to live and we take care of them. True. But still I believe we look upon the disabled in the same way as the savage does. He kills such children because he thinks them inferior. We allow them to live, but why? Because we look upon them as equal with other children? Not at all! Since our religion or philosophy tells us that all human beings are equal we pay lip-service to this dogma. But in its secret heart society believes what it has always believed, and thinks what it has always thought. And it is this belief and these thoughts that are the motivating force behind the treatment of the invalid. For the sake of clarity

I want to introduce two children into the picture, Mary and George, both living in a so-called civilized society. They serve to illustrate two different ways of treating invalid children, both common, and both wrong. On the surface, they are very different, but the same motive seems to lie behind them, and they tend to produce just about the same result.

Mary is born into humane and cultivated surroundings, where everyone is sorry for her. The other children are taught to behave very considerately towards Mary because, she's a cripple you know'. Children are by nature straightforward and brutally honest, but they need not be cruel and hard-hearted. They catch the mood of their elders, and are kind to 'poor Mary'. At home, too, she is spoiled. Her brothers and sisters are told to give in to her; she gets the prettiest doll and the prettiest dress. After a while, however, her playmates draw back from Mary. They are tired of her; she is so demanding, so dominating, so troublesome. More and more, she is left to herself. She has become an unhappy outsider.

George is born into surroundings that are less refined and cultivated. His parents are bitterly disappointed, and can't hide it. The neighbours are more or less indifferent. The family has neither the time nor the money to spoil him. Here too, children catch the mood of their elders, and George is certainly not spoiled by them. On the contrary, the 'children may mock his defect and push him aside. After a while, he draws back from the company of others. He has become an unhappy outsider.

How is it that such different treatment produces results so similar? The reason is that the underlying attitude is the same in both cases. Mary was spoiled because the people around her considered her an inferior, a creature no one ought to punish. George was ill-treated because those

around him considered him an inferior and, being brutal and coarse, they had no patience with him. In neither case is the child treated like other children, and the effect is disastrous. It creates what one might call 'the invalid mind'.

Time passes and childhood ripens into youth. Young people want to experience life, to live fully. What happens to Mary and George when they go in search of pleasure? In a word - nothing. What would they be doing on a dance floor? Even if her infirmity is a slight one, who wants to dance with a girl who has a limp? Here Mary is even worse off than George, as beauty and physical fitness are more prized in a girl than in a boy.

They both feel they are not wanted where young people enjoy themselves. This doesn't mean that they are brutally driven away. No, the bullies from George's childhood generally grow up into rather decent youths, who feel sorry for a crippled comrade. But, after all, they have their own lives to lead and have a right to go their own ways. They leave the invalid to himself. Exit Mary and George from the world of youthful pleasures.

But in the world of work or study, surely there is a place for the invalid. Helped by all the labour-saving devices of our time, even a badly handicapped person should be able to work. For instance a barrister could defend his client from a wheelchair. Theoretically, this is true. But what are the invalid's chances in real life? Are employers just as willing to engage disabled people as to engage anyone else? No, as a rule they are not.

There are several reasons for this. The employer may think that a disabled person is more of a 'crank' than the normal worker. He may be afraid that the other workers would not want to be troubled with a cripple. Or perhaps the reason is that the employer doesn't like disabled

people. Very few will admit to such ignoble feelings. But these feelings exist, all the same, and perhaps they are more widespread than one might think. They are so much more dangerous for not being openly admitted and fought against.

The employer doesn't treat the disabled applicant badly. He just says, 'Sorry, but I really have no job for you', or something to that effect. Very few are so brutally 'honest' as the head of one Teachers Training College, when a young disabled girl wanted to become a teacher. He refused to take her as a student because, he said, the children would have no respect for a crippled teacher. Mostly people don't admit that the disability is the real cause of refusal, but nonetheless the disabled person is gently but firmly placed where society wants him to be, not in the place of his own choice. Remarkably few have reached any leading position in society. President Roosevelt we may count as an exception, and he was already a well-known politician when he met with polio. If he had been a cripple from birth would he have died as President of the United States?

In his encounter with society the invalid rarely meets active dislike or disgust. But if he ventures into the world of love, such feelings are not so far off. It happens, on occasion, that a disabled person falls in love with a normal member of society. Sometimes it even happens that this love is reciprocated. It is interesting to observe the different reactions to such-one is tempted to say-a social outrage. One gets the impression that the invalid has more or less committed an indecent act. He isn't supposed to have such feelings. And the 'normal' partner in such a crazy adventure -well, he is hardly considered normal at all. He ought to have his head examined. Some people seem to feel offended at the thought that a 'disabled' person feels the same way as a 'normal' person does.

This reaction is not apparent when invalids marry one another. As long as they keep to themselves society doesn't really mind. The invalid may marry another of his kind, and live happily or unhappily ever after. Society doesn't greatly care whether he is happy or unhappy as long as society isn't troubled. A wall is raised between the 'normal' world and the world of the disabled - a wall invisible and hard and cold as unbreakable glass.

This picture of society, as seen by the invalid, is not a very pretty one. But a picture need not be pretty in order to be true. I fancy society won't recognize it at all. How could it? Can ordinary people be guilty of such mental cruelty without even realizing what they do? No, surely we aren't that bad. And how is it that the people suffering from such treatment don't react against it more strongly than they do? Surely this picture isn't a picture at all, but rather a caricature drawn by an ill-tempered artist!

What can one answer to such objections? First, I would point out that a caricature, if it is good, has a certain resemblance to the person depicted. Next, that ordinary people have been guilty of cruel deeds before now, as history shows. But the third objection needs a more detailed answer. Why is it that disabled people don't protest more if they really are subject to such prejudice?

Books have been written about 'the criminal mind'. I want to say something about 'the invalid mind'. This mind, this attitude, develops and shows most markedly in persons who are born disabled or become so at an early age. A man or woman who becomes disabled at thirty years of age may meet with great troubles and difficulties. The husband and breadwinner, educated for some particular kind of work, will probably have to leave his job and look for another. The mother may have to leave her children to the care of others. But there is a difference between these

latecomers to disability and those who are handicapped from an early age.

Since the person disabled early in life is nearly always treated as an inferior he develops a strong feeling of inferiority. Being often humiliated, he naturally seeks to avoid humiliations. He tends to become suspicious and sensitive, feeling snubs where none are intended. He lacks self-respect, and often suffers rather than take the trouble of trying to fight back. He doesn't complain, because he is afraid of being accused of self-pity. He shows humbleness and thankfulness because he finds such behaviour serves him well, not because he feels any real thankfulness or friendliness towards the gracious benefactor or, perhaps more often, benefactress.

He often hides his bitterness behind a smiling face, and secretly despises the normal world which is so easily deceived and taken in. He firmly believes that normal people neither can, nor will, understand his troubles. This way of thinking is the natural result and outcome of his experiences. But nevertheless it is a dangerous state of mind. A person brooding on wrongs done to him isn't easy to get into contact with. His distorted mind colours everything done to him by normal people. Even when treated with respect he senses an intolerable and condescending attitude. So the contact-seekers from the other side of the wall have a hard time of it trying to break through.

One might expect to find these contact-seekers mostly among people dedicated to the service of sufferers; doctors, nurses, social workers of all kinds. Strangely enough this is not the case. Their work seems to dull rather than to sharpen their sensibility. A relief-worker, visiting twenty invalids a week, may well have a blurred picture of them, not seeing them as people with individual

traits and problems. There is perhaps some excuse for this.

But there is another barrier between the sick or disabled and their helpers. I have touched on the condescending attitude of society towards the disabled, and the resentment created by such an attitude. I am sorry to say that this unfortunate attitude tends to exist and develop even more strongly amongst people dedicated to help the sufferer than amongst ordinary citizens. The clue to this fact is the phrase 'dedicated to help'.

Our society today is very much service-minded. In the old days people mostly lived on what they manufactured at home, and they travelled very little. Today people work as shopkeepers, waiters, bus conductors and at many other service jobs. And this is seen as a natural thing. No one expects the customer to feel any particular gratitude to the girl behind the shop counter or a waiter in a restaurant. They are just doing their job, and they are paid for it.

But with people working as doctors, nurses, relief-workers, it isn't quite the same thing. They are 'dedicated to serve and help', they have a 'vocation'. They 'sacrifice' themselves. Perhaps this way of thinking is inherited from the time when the State did very little to relieve the suffering of the poor and helpless. Works of mercy were mostly done by priests, nuns and monks, who did dedicate their lives to help others. Their sacrifice was real, not just a figure of speech.

Today all this has changed. The State has very much taken over the care of the sick and disabled, and doctors and nurses " are paid for their services, like anyone else. But the halo of sacrifice still clings to them and makes it difficult for them to treat their 'customers' as equal human beings. It is just this halo which irritates the people they

are trying to help. This irritation is perhaps easiest to find amongst those who have met with accidents or sickness as adults. They have lived a normal life, and haven't developed the cringing, submissive 'invalid mind'. They resent being treated as silly children, resent the condescending 'we know what is good for you' attitude.

And here we are back where we started. The problem is a problem of attitude. Society must change its attitude to the invalid. Disabled people must retain their integrity and not allow anyone to patronize them. But the first step must be to recognize the facts about ourselves and our attitudes.